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**Author:** Bożena Cetnarowska

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BOŻENA CETNAROWSKA  
University of Silesia  
bozena.cetnarowska@us.edu.pl

## VAGUENESS OF QUALITATIVE DENOMINAL ADJECTIVES IN ENGLISH

The aim of the paper is to discuss vagueness of denominal adjectives in English in their qualitative usage. Semantic indeterminacy will be illustrated for selected denominal adjectives with the suffix *-ial*, focusing on the lexeme *professorial*. The range of the qualitative senses of such adjectives will be exemplified by sentences culled from COCA and other linguistic corpora. It will be argued that typicality effects (as discussed by Lakoff 1987) are relevant to the identification (and flexibility) of meanings of denominal adjectives.

Keywords: *denominal adjectives, qualitative adjectives, vagueness, typicality effects*

### 1. Introduction: Relational vs. qualitative adjectives

Denominal adjectives are traditionally divided into two basic semantic types: relational and qualitative (also called “qualifying”) adjectives (see Fradin 2017 for French, Bosque and Picallo 1996 for Spanish, Szymanek 1985, 1988 for English and Polish, Plag 2003 and Schmid 2011 for English, Szymanek 2010 for Polish). Relational adjectives (abbreviated as RAs) are regarded as transpositional formations (cf. Spencer 1999), which means that their derivation results in a change of the syntactic category of the base (from Noun to Adjective) without affecting the semantics of the base. RAs can be paraphrased as ‘pertaining to N, relating to N’, e.g. *governmental* ‘pertaining to (the) government’ in *governmental institutions*, and *articulatory* ‘pertaining to articulation’ in *articulatory system*. Nikolaeva and Spencer (2013) argue that relational adjectives cross-linguistically show the inflectional properties of adjectives but have the canonical denotation of a noun. Qualitative adjectives (abbreviated as QAs) denote features characteristic of the referent of the base noun, e.g. *silky* ‘resembling silk’ in *silky skin* and *Hemingwayesque* ‘resembling Hemingway, in the manner of Hemingway’ in the phrase

*the Hemingwayesque white beard*. The affixes *-esque*, *-ful*, *-ish*, *-y* and *-ly* in English derive adjectives which allow only (or primarily) the qualitative interpretation, e.g. *tactful* ‘having or showing tact’, *vampirish* ‘characteristic of a vampire, resembling a vampire’, *sunny* ‘full of sunshine’ and *kingly* ‘in a manner befitting a king’. Often the same adjective (i.e. the same morphological shape) allows both a relational and a qualitative usage, depending on its immediate context, e.g. *nervous* (RA) ‘relating to the nerves’ in *the nervous system* and *nervous* (QA) ‘easily agitated’ in *a nervous woman*. Warren (1984) argues that the relational reading is primary with denominal *-al* adjectives such as *professional* or *formal*, and the qualitative reading results from the relational sense due to semantic shift.

In this paper I will examine adjectives with the suffix *-ial* (such as *ambassadorial*, *gladiatorial*, *professorial*), which show both relational and qualitative readings. First, however, in section 2 diagnostic tests will be presented which can be used to disambiguate a denominal adjective in a particular context as a relational or qualitative one. The most common qualitative senses of denominal adjectives will be mentioned in the same section. Section 3 will discuss the notions of vagueness and typicality effects. Then in section 4 the range of qualitative senses attested with the adjective *professorial* in COCA<sup>1</sup> will be examined. The influence of typicality effects on the interpretation of qualitative adjectives will be considered.

## 2. Qualitative adjectives: features and range of meanings

Qualitative adjectives show features of canonical adjectives. They are gradable (as in 1a) and can be used with degree expressions, such as *exceptionally* (1b). They can appear both in the attributive position (1a–b) and in the predicative position (1c–e). QAs differ in this respect from relational adjectives since the latter are not gradable (see 1f) and are not felicitous in the predicative position (1g).

- (1) a. I haven’t the foggiest idea what you’re talking about.  
 b. It was an exceptionally foggy day.  
 c. iMac screen seems foggy.  
 d. The teacher sounded waspish.  
 e. Her voice grew waspish.  
 f. \*the most departmental library  
 g. \*The engineer was agricultural.

<sup>1</sup> One of the anonymous reviewers remarks that it would be interesting to see whether the senses of qualitative denominal adjectives are the same in American and British English. This issue will be left for future research. While the majority of the examples discussed in the present paper come from the Corpus of Contemporary American English, some sentences culled from the British National Corpus appear in (21).

Qualitative adjectives, in contrast to relational ones, can act as derivational bases for abstract nouns denoting qualities (3a, 4a) and for adverbs (3b, 4b).

- (2) a. foggy (QA) – fogginess (N) – foggily (Adv)  
       b. waspish (QA) – waspishness (N) – waspishly (Adv)
- (3) a. Symptoms include daytime sleepiness, mental fogginess and morning headaches. (COCA\_2002\_MAG\_TownCountry)  
       b. Will looked at him foggily, the exhaustion in his face masking any emotion. (COCA\_2009\_FIC\_Analog)
- (4) a. Don't start bothering me with trivialities or my full waspishness will come out. (COCA\_2012\_FIC\_FantasySciFi)  
       b. "Just like you said she would," Tullea snapped waspishly. (COCA\_2011\_FIC\_Bk:DragonsTime)

Szymanek (1985, 2010) identifies two main classes of QAs (in English and Polish), namely possessional adjectives and similitudinal adjectives.

Possessional denominal adjectives require the general paraphrase 'possessing N', which may be made more specific, i.e. 'having N, full of N, abounding in N, covered with N', as in *wealthy* 'having wealth', *sunny* 'full of sunshine', *juicy* 'full of juice', *stony* 'abounding in stones' and *grassy* 'covered with grass'. Possession may be interpreted in the figurative, rather than in the literal sense, as in the case of *lucky* 'having or marked by good luck'.

Similitudinal adjectives can be roughly paraphrased as 'like N, resembling N'. Their exact paraphrase depends on the type of the base noun, the semantics of the head noun and on the speakers' knowledge of the world. When derived from names of physical objects, such adjectives can exhibit the general sense 'similar to N in its physical properties'.

- (5) Similitudinal adjectives from concrete nouns: 'similar to N in its physical properties'
  - a. in texture: papery leaves, gluey rice
  - b. in thickness: watery soup
  - c. in shape: spiky hair, baggy uniform
  - d. in colour: sandy hair, milky smoke

Qualitative adjectives derived from (or related to) names of animals are illustrated in (6-7). They can be given the similitudinal paraphrase 'similar to N in appearance' (in 6) or 'similar to N in behaviour' (in 7).

- (6) 'Similar to N in appearance':
  - a. in shape: feline eyes
  - b. in size: elephantine convention centre

- (7) ‘Similar to N in behaviour’:
- a. elephantine dance (i.e. clumsy dance)
  - b. tigerish speed (i.e. fast speed)
  - c. waspish temper (i.e. snappish temper)

Qualitative adjectives derived from names of people call for the paraphrase ‘characteristic of N, befitting N, like N in any way’.

- (8) a. The screen displays two combatants – you and your gladiatorial opponent. (COCA\_2002\_MAG\_TechReview)
- b. The idea of risking lives in order to engage the public has too much of a gladiatorial disrespect for human life for my taste. (COCA\_2004\_MAG\_PopScience)
- c. the British legal system, which would expose their mother to a gladiatorial battle between the opposing lawyers, each seeking to prove their case, neither charged directly with establishing exactly what had happened. (COCA\_1990\_FIC\_Bk:Stardust)
- d. an avant-garde show with vampirish performers in flowing white capes, claws, stilts and Medusa hair. (COCA\_1996\_NEWS\_AssocPress)
- e. But this time the stranger is Athena herself, disguised as a shepherd boy with princely bearing, who delays the revelation of the precious news. (COCA\_2013\_FIC\_SouthwestRev)

The exact interpretation of the adjectives given in (8) requires extralinguistic (e.g. cultural) knowledge. Opponents can be described as gladiatorial if they are physically strong, very well armed, ready to fight and risk their lives. If a speaker knows what a vampire looks like, he/she can interpret the phrase *vampirish performers* adequately. The knowledge of the world (and of the behaviour typical of aristocracy) is also useful in the interpretation of the phrase *princely bearing*.

In the next section some attention will be given to stereotypes and typicality effects. The importance of typicality effects to the resolution of vagueness of denominal adjectives will be demonstrated.

### 3. Vagueness, stereotypes, and typicality effects

The exact interpretation of qualitative denominal adjectives is determined by their sentential context, as well as by the speakers’ extralinguistic knowledge. This is illustrated below for the adjective *ambassadorial*, derived from the noun *ambassador*.

- (9) a. I’m staunchly myself, yet I seem to have a kind of ambassadorial quality and ease with talking to folks who would not like any of my “labels”.

(<http://fantasydebut.blogspot.com/2007/10/interview-with-carole-mc-donnell.html>)

- b. Helms has myriad objections to Weld, from “loose lips” to lack of “ambassadorial quality.” (COCA\_1997\_NEWS\_USAToday)
- c. His talk was a masterpiece of elucidation, delivered in proper ambassadorial style. (COCA\_1994\_FIC\_Bk:Recessional)
- d. And with a dazzling new home, a high-profile address and the persuasive, ambassadorial Marsalis at the helm, Jazz at Lincoln Center is poised to reach and teach people about this always exciting, ever-evolving music. (COCA\_2004\_MAG\_TownCountry)
- e. Federer, 24, has a dignified, ambassadorial presence and speaks four languages. (COCA\_2006\_MAG\_SportsIll)

The linguistic context highlights one or more features from a set of traits prototypically attributed to ambassadors. The expression *ambassadorial quality* in (9a) and (9b) seems to refer mainly to tactfulness and conciliatoriness. In (9c) oratory skills of ambassadors are emphasized. The ability to lead and inspire others is implied by the adjective *ambassadorial* in sentence (9d). Since diplomats represent their countries abroad, their physical appearance matters as well, as is indicated by the phrase *ambassadorial presence* in (9e).

Qualitative adjectives derived from names of people can be treated as either ambiguous<sup>2</sup> or vague. In other words, it can be assumed that *ambassadorial* is polysemous in its qualitative function and exhibits several distinct senses, such as ‘resembling N in oratory skills’ and ‘resembling N in appearance’. Alternatively, it can be argued that similitudinal qualitative adjectives are vague and therefore their meaning is general and imprecise (Tuggy 1993). The latter position will be taken in this paper. Slightly different interpretations of qualitative adjectives (such as *ambassadorial* or *gladiatorial*) in selected sentences can be treated as instances of a single vague sense.

Several tests allowing the researcher to distinguish between polysemy and vagueness are mentioned by Geeraerts (2010: 192-199).<sup>3</sup> One of them involves the ‘identity-of-sense anaphora’.<sup>4</sup> It employs speakers’ acceptability judgments of sentences in which reference is made to two slightly different interpretations of a single lexeme. Let us consider the sentence *The president thought that the candidate lacked “ambassadorial quality” and so did the senators*. The sentence is acceptable (and can be uttered felicitously) in a situation when the

<sup>2</sup> According to Tuggy (1993), ambiguity may result either from homonymy or polysemy of lexical items. In this paper no attention is given to homonymy, but see Cetnarowska (2014) on the issue of homonymy or polysemy of denominal adjectives.

<sup>3</sup> Geeraerts (2010) observes that the application of these tests may lead in some cases to contradictory conclusions.

<sup>4</sup> The majority of tests discussed by Geeraerts (2010) are applicable to nouns and are not useful in diagnosing polysemy or vagueness of adjectives.

president criticized the candidate for bad oratory skills and the senators pointed out his or her lack of other qualities important for high-level diplomats (e.g. elegance, or the ability to keep confidential matters in secret).

Yet another test for polysemy (or ambiguity) involves the juxtaposition of two discrete senses in the same sentence. As pointed out by Geeraerts (2010: 197), the two senses of the word *port*, namely ‘harbour’ and ‘fortified sweet wine from Portugal’, can be contrasted in a single sentence, which can simultaneously be true and false of the same referent, e.g. *Sandeman is a port (in a bottle) but not a port (with ships)*. The relational reading ‘pertaining to N’ and the qualitative reading ‘characteristic of N’ can be juxtaposed in the following sentence *The new ambassadorial nominee is less ambassadorial than his predecessor*. Thus, the relational and the qualitative senses should be regarded as distinct senses. On the other hand, the interpretations ‘persuasive’ and ‘having dignified and elegant appearance’ are subcases of a single sense ‘characteristic of ambassadors’. The speaker is unlikely to contrast them in a single sentence, i.e. *?\*The new nominee is ambassadorial but is not ambassadorial*.

Adjectives derived from names of people reflect beliefs and expectations about a given group. Properties associated with certain groups of people (e.g. selected professions and positions, such as presidents, managers, ambassadors) are determined by stereotypes, which are shared by members of a given speech community.

Stereotypes can be viewed as “abstract knowledge structures linking a social group to a set of traits or behavioral characteristics” (Hamilton and Sherman 1994: 3). In a cognitive approach, a stereotype is “a cognitive structure that contains the perceiver’s knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about a human group” (Hamilton and Trier 1986: 13). Such stereotypes facilitate the resolution of the vagueness of qualitative denominal adjectives. This testifies to the importance of Lakoff’s Idealized Cognitive Models (ICMs), i.e. systems in which the knowledge of the world is organized in the speakers’ minds based on human experience.

Lakoff (1987) identifies several ways in which typicality effects come into being. They result via metonymy from social stereotypes, typical examples, ideals, paragons, generators, submodels and salient examples (for discussion see also Evans and Green 2006, Duda 2017).

Social stereotypes define cultural expectations concerning a member of a particular category. They are conscious and open to public discussion, therefore they can change over time, e.g. the social stereotype of a mother (as discussed by Lakoff 1987). Typical examples, on the other hand, are unconscious and unchangeable (e.g. apples are mentioned as typical examples of fruit). They are used by a speaker automatically to make inferences about atypical examples of a given category.

Typicality effects may arise from cultural knowledge about ideal members of a particular category, even though such ideal cases are not typical examples (e.g. an ideal teacher, an ideal sportsman or an ideal garden). Actual instances of



an ideal are represented by paragons, such as the best teacher, the best football player, or an award-winning garden.<sup>5</sup>

Core members of a category may function as “generators”, which are employed to “generate” (i.e. to define) other members of the category. Submodels serve as “cognitive reference points” and exhibit typicality effects, e.g. primary colours (established on a biological basis). A salient example is a particularly memorable example of a category, e.g. a Californian earthquake is a salient example of a natural disaster according to Lakoff (1987: 89). It may stand metonymically for a whole category.

It will be shown in the next section how typicality effects influence the interpretation of the denominal adjective *professorial*.

#### 4. Qualitative senses of the adjective *professorial*

As was mentioned in section 3, the meaning of relational adjectives is usually stated as ‘of N, relating to N’ while for qualitative similitudinal adjectives it is common to employ the general paraphrase ‘like N, befitting N, characteristic of N’. This is illustrated by some definitions provided for *professorial*, e.g. ‘of or like a professor’ (Cambridge Dictionary <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english>) or ‘relating to or characteristic of professors’ (<https://www.thefreedictionary.com>).

Although relational adjectives are not the focus of this article, below in (10) some examples are provided of the occurrence of *professorial* in the transpositional (i.e. relational) function.

- (10) a. The immense sum of seven thousand dollars, then the summit of the professorial scale, attracted four great scientists from Clark University. (COCA\_2001\_ACAD\_AmerScholar)
- b. F. RICHARD STEPHENSON is a Professorial Fellow in the Department of Physics at the University of Durham. (COCA\_1999\_MAG\_SkyTelescope)

The adjective *professorial* can be regarded both as ambiguous (i.e. polysemous or homonymous) and vague. It exhibits the ambiguity between the relational and the qualitative readings. Moreover, it is vague in the qualitative similitudinal sense.

This vagueness (i.e. semantic indeterminacy) is particularly visible when the adjective in question is used predicatively. Fradin (2017: 42) points out (on the basis of data from French) that the usage of a denominal adjective in the predicative position is acceptable when there exists a set of properties associated with the referent of the base noun and this set can be predicated felicitously of the noun phrase in the subject position.

<sup>5</sup> A Rolls-Royce is a paragon of a luxury car.



It is up to the reader (or the listener) to arrive at the precise meaning of *professorial* in the examples provided in (11), by determining which properties of the category PROFESSOR should be predicated of the noun phrase in the subject position, e.g. Barack Obama in (11a).

- (11) a. (...) he knew the purpose of every question that he was answering. Barack was professorial, he wandered around. We know how smart Barack Obama is. (COCA\_2008\_SPOKNBC\_Matthews)  
 b. Professor Lyall became quite professorial. (COCA\_2012\_FIC\_Bk:Timeless)  
 c. Those who prepare teachers need to become facilitators of learning and less “professorial”. (COCA\_2012\_ACAD\_AmericanSecondary)  
 d. Just don’t sound so damn professorial when doing so. I have been out of university many years now. (COCA\_1997\_FIC\_Bk:TotalControl)  
 e. He’s literally professorial. He was an economics professor. (COCA\_2006\_SPOKPR\_ATC)

The vagueness of the qualitative adjective *professorial* is “inherited” by the adverb *professorially* and the abstract noun *professorialness*.<sup>6</sup>

- (12) a. “Tell you what, Aaron, your client’s in bad shape,” Bich said professorially. “He’s got two years left on his parole (COCA\_1994\_FIC\_Bk:NightPrey)  
 b. With him was an imposing array of politburocrats: goateed Premier Nikolai Bulganin, smiling professorially; First Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan, the clever Armenian who masterminds Soviet trade policy (TIME\_CORPUS\_1955/08/18)  
 (13) a. Well, geez, I guess I can’t escape the professorialness, eh? (mckitterick.livejournal.com/305367.html)  
 b. My professorialness got out of hand. I apologize. (www.ontla.on.ca › Accueil › Comités › Documents des comités)

While a reader or a listener can give their own interpretation of the qualitative adjective in question (or its suffixal derivatives terminating in *-ness* and *-ly*), certain senses of *professorial* are conventionalized and easy to activate. They are so common that they are listed in a dictionary for learners of English. The following definition is given in the Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary (1987), where the first part expresses the qualitative sense and the second part – the relational sense.

- (14) *professorial* ‘1. looking or behaving like a person who has great authority;  
 2. relating to the work of a professor’

<sup>6</sup> There are no hits for *professorialness* in COCA. Consequently, appropriate examples in (13) and (24) come from Google searches.

Taylor (2006) emphasizes the semantic contribution of the context to the interpretation of a given polysemous or semantically vague word. The occurrence of the adjective *distinguished* or the noun *authority* in (15a-b) brings into prominence the sense ‘looking or behaving like a person who has great authority’, mentioned in (14).

- (15) a. flecks of silver frosting the edges of his hair made him look more distinguished and professorial. (COCA\_2012\_FIC\_Bk:Beckon)
- b. I reached for a tone of professorial authority. (COCA\_1997\_FIC\_Analog)

The association of professors with distinction and authority is due to the existence of ideal members of the category and paragons, e.g. Nobel laureates and professors from elite universities. Some other positive properties exhibited by paragons and mapped (via metonymy) onto the whole category of professors are exemplified in (16). These attributes include precision in formulating one’s views, confidence and readiness to get involved in an academic debate.

- (16) a. Edgar, who was a teacher like me, had a professorial openness to all question-and-answer sessions, and he would have been a good sport. (COCA\_1996\_MAG\_GoodHousekeeping)
- b. Her tone is confident, professorial, as if she has figured things out. (COCA\_2015\_FIC\_Confrontation)
- c. His mathematician’s keen analytical mind went, huh? # Aloud, with professorial precision, he said, “Holy shit!” (COCA\_1997\_FIC\_FantasySciFi)

Some characteristics attributed to the class of professors are negative (or at best neutral). The adjective professorial occurs in such combinations as *professorial absent-mindedness*, and *professorial daydreaming*, as shown in (17).

- (17) a. to be replaced by a thin gruel of abstractions bearing the stamp of professorial daydreaming: social forces, patterns of personality, determinants of behavior, socialization processes, organization theory, and so forth. (COCA\_1995\_ACAD\_PerspPolSci)
- b. Surely the premise that an insurance bill that I open, read and write a check for is somehow a hidden cost abuses the privilege of professorial absent-mindedness. (COCA\_1995\_ACAD\_AcademicQs)

It can be assumed that negative traits (apart from positive ones) are associated with the category as a result of inferences from typical examples of university teachers that a speaker (or speakers) encountered. Therefore, it is not surprising that the stereotype of a professor may include contradictory properties, such as disorderliness vs. pedantry; arrogance vs. mildness (or patience), benevolence vs. coldness.

- (18) a. he said, pointing to a thin mat and pillow on the floor amid the professorial clutter. (COCA\_1994\_NEWS\_Houston)
- b. Monty Python got back at professorial pedants by making great merri-ment with “litotes” and its improbable sound.) (COCA\_1992\_MAG\_NaturalHist)
- c. (...) his bookish glasses sitting askew his nose, giving him a misleading look of professorial forgetfulness and mildness (COCA\_1990\_ACAD\_ArabStudies)
- d. “Change is coming, Anna,” Johann said with annoying professorial patience. (COCA\_2015\_FIC\_Bk:AnnasCrossingAmish)
- d. The advancement by the academy of these claims of superior wisdom and superior honesty is an act of professorial arrogance. (COCA\_1997\_ACAD\_LawPublicPol)
- e. If the woman happens to be pretty, these animus opinions have for the man something rather touching and childlike about them, which which makes him adopt a benevolent, fatherly, professorial manner. (COCA\_1997\_FIC\_Metis)
- f. And instead you came out and you were coldly logical, somewhat professorial. (COCA\_2015\_SPOK\_Fox)

Co-existence of mutually exclusive features referring to the personality or physical appearance of a stereotypical professor may be due to the occurrence of contradictory salient examples of the category. One is Albert Einstein, a theoretical physician and Nobel prize winner. The features describing appearance or behaviour attributed to Einstein (and to other eccentric intellectuals) are implied by the adjective *professorial* in the sentences in (19).

- (19) a. He enjoys the image of a sort of eccentric professorial type, his hair in disarray, wearing a cardigan sweater. (COCA\_1997\_NEWS\_SanFran-Chron)
- b. Sculley’s longish, uncombed hair adds to his professorial air, as does his notion of business attire: khakis or blue corduroys, (COCA\_1993\_MAG\_Fortune)
- c. Baker is a tall, professorial type given to illustrating his comments with back-of-a-napkin sketches. (COCA\_2013\_MAG\_PopScience)

Quite a different type of look is associated with college professors who adhere to a formal dress code in order to project an aura of authority (especially teachers from best private universities in the Northeastern United States). Some salient examples of university teachers with the Ivy League look are actually fictional characters. One of them is Professor Robert Langdon, teaching Symbology and Art History at Harvard, from Dan Brown’s *Robert Langdon* book series (including *Angels and Demons*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Lost Symbol*, *Inferno* and *Origin*). He usually wears a turtleneck, Harris Tweed jacket, khakis, and

collegiate cordovan loafers. Other fictional salient examples are John Keating (portrayed by Robin Williams) in *Dead Poets Society*, and Atticus Finch from Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (played by Gregory Peck in the 1962 film). Google searches can provide more examples of the recognition of the features of the Ivy League style by speakers of English.

- (20) a. With his bow tie and professorial demeanor, McHale conjures images of Atticus Finch, the quiet protagonist (COCA\_1996\_NEWS\_Denver)  
 b. Now don't get me wrong, not all educational leaders have a style to be inspired by (cue images of your high school teachers with awful ties and beer guts). But the iconic, traditional Northeast universities have more tweeds, wools and wingtips per capita than any area on earth. (<http://dressedtoill.com/2013/10/07/ivy-league-style/>)

Yet another fictional character regarded as a salient example of the category of professors is Cuthbert Binns in Harry Potter series, who teaches History of Magic at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Old age, unattractive physical appearance and the inability to present in an interesting way the subjects taught are associated with this kind of "professorial type", as suggested by the sentences in (21).

- (21) a. At the other end of the table from Dowd, sitting in front of a heap of newspapers doubtless carrying the Burke reports, sat a professorial man in his sixties, white hair oiled to his scalp. (BYU\_BNC\_CRE\_W\_fictprose)  
 b. He knew his own country was falling back to heathenism again (if only on the model of Saruman, not Sauron), and while mere professorial preaching would make no difference, a story might. (BYU\_BNC\_CDV\_W\_non\_ac\_humanities\_arts)  
 c. The lanky geologist from nearby Colorado Mesa University normally speaks in a low-key professorial drone. (COCA\_2014\_MAG\_Science-News)

In some passages culled from COCA (or found on websites) speakers try to facilitate (for their interlocutors or readers) the interpretation of semantically underspecified lexemes by adding synonymous non-vague items or by providing paraphrases which indicate what is meant by the vague lexical item in question. This is illustrated for the adjective *professorial* in (22), for the adverb *professorially* in (23), and for the abstract noun *professorialness* in (24).

- (22) a. Soft-spoken and a coach whose thoughtful manner and physical slightness make him appear almost professorial (COCA\_1997\_NEWS\_Atlanta)

- b. a neat, reserved, rather sober, professorial man whose colleagues referred to him with affectionate mockery as “le Docteur” (COCA\_1990\_MAG\_Smithsonian)
- (23) a. McNamara waxed eloquently and professorially about his new theory of “gradualism.” (<https://books.google.pl/books?isbn=1493026836>)
- b. I had not one but two professors at college who would lean back in their chairs, listening and fitting their hands together fingertip to fingertip, professorially. (<https://books.google.pl/books?isbn=143914477X>)
- (24) a. They reek of the university. That deliberate and fierce pedantry of theirs. Their professorialness. The spitefulness, obstinance in boredom, unsociability, intellectual pride, austerity... their manners offend me, their language is too high-flown. ([http://w11.zetaboards.com/The\\_Auteurs/search/4/?c=3&mid=3871188&month=7&year=2014](http://w11.zetaboards.com/The_Auteurs/search/4/?c=3&mid=3871188&month=7&year=2014))
- b. He was meticulous, neat, hard working bastard and I detested him for his professorialness and his utter gentlemanliness. ([kannanwrites.blogspot.com/2010/12/lost-friend.html](http://kannanwrites.blogspot.com/2010/12/lost-friend.html))

Thus, the examination of the sentences coming from COCA, BYU-BNC or found during Google searches suggests that speakers may be aware of the semantic underspecification of qualitative similitudinal adjectives, and of the vagueness of their *-ly* and *-ness* derivatives.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper examined the interpretation of English similitudinal adjectives derived from names of people, such as *gladiatorial*, *ambassadorial* and *professorial*. It was argued that denominal adjectives in their similitudinal reading should be treated as semantically underspecified. The vague sense ‘characteristic of N’ is given a more precise interpretation due to the occurrence of social stereotypes, paragons and salient examples of the category denoted by the base noun of a particular adjective (e.g. the category of PROFESSOR). The exact paraphrase of *professorial* (and other denominal adjectives) is easier to arrive at also due to the semantic contribution of the sentential context.

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